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‘Engaged Listenership in Spoken Academic Discourse: the case of student-tutor meetings’

Abstract

This article uses a corpus of spoken English from an Irish university setting to examine how engaged listenership is signaled in meetings between tutors and graduate students. The various linguistic devices employed by both parties for this purpose are quantified and functionally analysed. The three strategies examined include minimal response tokens e.g. *mm hm*, *mm*, *yeah*, non-minimal response tokens e.g. *really*, *right*, *fine*, *good*, and simultaneous speech and interruptions. These items are found to differ quantitatively and functionally and are shown to be highly relevant for the effective functioning of students in such a spoken EAP context. Pedagogic implications are presented.

Keywords

Spoken academic language, listenership tokens, interruption, simultaneous speech.

Bionote

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Engaged Listenership in Spoken Academic Discourse: the case of student-tutor meetings

Introduction

It is an acknowledgement and a tribute to scholars in this field that an independent journal of EAP has been born. Indeed the questions raised in the first issue predicted an exciting, interesting and perhaps even slightly controversial path ahead. Despite the predominant focus in that issue and in EAP research in general on the written language, it is most encouraging that we have in this current issue a dedication to spoken academic language. It is no less than a truism to say that the many problems debated in relation to the written academic word apply equally, though perhaps differently, to the spoken academic word. From this perspective it is refreshing to see a broadened definition proposed by Hyland and Hamp-Lyons (2002: 2), when they suggest that EAP, ‘means grounding instruction in an understanding of the cognitive, social and linguistic demands of specific academic disciplines. This takes practitioners beyond preparing learners for study in English to developing new kinds of literacy: equipping students with the communicative skills to participate in particular academic and cultural contexts’. By accepting that we have a duty towards communicatively mediated instruction to include both academic and cultural considerations we cannot deny the importance for students to experience all language skills in variety of relevant contexts. Evidence to justify such an approach is presented by Jordan (2002), who cites studies which empirically conclude that the initial difficulties students encounter in the L2 academic environment are primarily in the domains of listening and speaking. And while acknowledging that we now operate in a society where ‘multi-literacies’ (Cummins 2000; Warschauer 2000) (to include technological competence) are demanded, this cannot be to the detriment of traditional pedagogical priorities. In fact, I will argue later that it should be accomplished applying highly integrated and dependent pedagogical methods. So, if we accept the significance of and need for further attention to the skills of speaking and listening we must also accept the multitude of differences between the conventions of speaking and writing. Corpus-based researchers and work in the conversation analysis tradition have shed a vast amount of light on the nature of spoken language (see for example Tannen 1982; Carter and McCarthy 1995; McCarthy 1998). Others have predicted radical changes on how language, in general, will be taught in the future. Conrad (2000: 549) suggests a ‘revolution’ in the teaching of language which will be determined by register-specific

descriptions and the ‘appropriate conditions of use for alternative grammatical constructions’. Her views, strongly supported by corpus-based research findings, are concomitant with the ‘evidence that academic discourses represent a variety of specific literacies’ (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002: 5). There have also been arguments that the field of EAP should involve the development of a critical awareness of the ideals, language and contexts encountered (Johns and Swales 2002, Pennycook 1997). This suggests that students should be encouraged to question the ideologies and conventions they come across and though I converge with such voices I would also like to sound a very strong warning signal that this practice should not be prematurely advocated or implemented. Students must be discerning of the relevant discourse or academic community before they can begin to critique it. And such knowledge is surely best gained through investigation and participation.

It is with all of this issues in mind that I now aim to provide a description of one aspect of interactional language use, namely engaged listenership, in the specific context of dyadic tutor-student meetings within the discipline of language teacher education. The ultimate objective of this investigation is of course to suggest how my findings have implications for the teaching of EAP. As a preliminary to the presentation of my data, results and analysis I would like to provide a rationale for considering the notion of ‘listenership’ in the context of academic discourse.

The Importance of Showing Listenership

Let us start by addressing the question of what ‘showing listenership’ means. It is generally accepted that at any point in a spoken interactional encounter one participant plays the role of primary speaker and the other the primary listener (this by no means ignores the premise that interlocutors are of course simultaneously both listener and speaker (Yngve 1970: 568)). A range of verbal and/or non-verbal devices may be produced by the primary listener which function to show that s/he is engaging at some level with the primary speaker’s talk. In effect, the display of one or a combination of these signals shows listenership. The realisation of listenership devices is varied and there is much debate in the literature in relation to formal and functional delimitations and categorisations (see below). Furthermore, there are two stances in relation to whether the production of a listenership device constitutes a turn (Drummond and Hopper

1993a, 1993b), a turn within a turn (Duncan and Fiske 1977; Goodwin 1986; Maynard 1990), a symbolic claim to the turn (Hayashi and Hayashi 1991) or simply functions as a back-channel (Yngve 1970: 568) without constituting a turn or taking the floor (Duncan 1974; White 1989; Tottie 1991; Fellego 1995; Gardener 1997a, 1997b; Maynard 1997; White 1997). I believe that such turn-related distinctions, while theoretically and academically significant for the scientific study of language, have little practical relevance for students of EAP for whom the phenomenon is more pertinent than the nomenclature and will therefore not be considered further on this occasion.

Spoken Discourse as an Interactional Achievement

Where two or more parties engage in spoken discourse within any given genre (with the obvious exceptions of presentation, lecture, some types of counselling etc), success is dependent on all parties playing their roles appropriately. Speakers provide talk and listeners react on cue using verbal and/or behavioural devices. Achievement results from collaboration and co-operation. This has long since been tested and recognised within the field of psychotherapy. Reece and Whitman's (1962) article, published in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology, reports on the vital role reinforcement (in the form of verbal signals e.g. good, fine and non-verbal signals e.g. smiles, nods) emanating from the therapist, which is consequential in making a patient feel more relaxed and positive about the experience and also promotes more productive verbal disclosure. In their experiments on college students the group which received the most 'warm reinforcement' produced the highest number of lexical items on a verbal stimulus recall test. Members of this group also reported a more friendly atmosphere than the groups which received less verbal and gesticular reinforcement. Such results suggest that listener behaviour not only has an affective role to play but also a transactional one (this will be discussed further in the following section). Linguists also have recognised that conversation is very much an interactional episode. Yngve (1970) talks about 'conversational partners', while Duncan (1974) identifies 'units of interaction' much akin to Schegloff's (1982) notion of 'interactional achievement' and Maynard's (1997) 'interactional management'. Duncan and Niederehe (1974) have dedicated much research to identifying the signals used to indicate 'speaker state' and the intricacies of the turn taking system. At an even more micro-level, Goodwin (1979) illustrates how the construction of a single sentence within conversation is most appropriately attained in an

interactive manner where all interlocutors play a part in its production and direction. And later Goodwin (1986: 205) categorically states that, ‘...there are strong grounds for conceptualizing language as intrinsically social in the sense that its prototypical organisation includes not only an entity who produces speech but also another who attends to that talk. From such a perspective talk is not simply a form of action but a mode of interaction’. Talk in the academic context under review in this paper is no exception to these norms. It is anticipated, expected and possibly imperative that students, when in listener mode, react in linguistically, socially and culturally appropriate ways to assist with the co-construction of the interaction.

The Multi-functional Nature of Listenership Devices

In this section I do not wish to address the functional issues associated with discrete listenership devices or tokens (this will follow later), but on a macro-level to discuss the general purposes they serve. It seems that they operate on three levels, one which is interpersonal or pragmatic and two which are more transactional. Pragmatically they have the capacity to attend to politeness wants and face needs. Taking Lakoff’s (1974) three rules of politeness, hesitancy (allowing options on speakership and listenership), equality (making other interlocutors feel good), and formality (creating distance so as not to impose), it becomes clear that listenership devices can fulfill any one or more of these prerequisites at any given time. For example a continuer type back-channel like mm hm is likely to show hesitancy and formality, whereas a short exclamation such as that’s wonderful is likely to demonstrate equality more forcefully. In addition, listener feedback can serve to attend to ‘face needs’ (Brown and Levinson 1987), both positive (the need to be unimpeded in one’s actions) and negative (the need to be approved of). On the other hand, the first transactional function performed is intricately linked with the turn taking system and floor management. These devices are used to show either listener acknowledgement that the speaker’s turn will continue and thereby allow the main channel to remain open, or to show that the listener is ready to assume a speaker state and take a fuller turn and perhaps eventually the conversational floor (Yngve 1970; Duncan 1974; Duncan and Niederehe 1974; Schegloff 1982; Jefferson 1984; Goodwin 1986; Hayashi and Hayashi 1991; Beach 1993; Drummond and Hopper 1993a, 1993b; Zimmerman 1993; Gardener 1997a, 1997b). The second transactional and partly referential function is one which I consider to be even more vital for non-native speakers of English. Listenership devices allow the user to signal if there has been some problem

with comprehending or processing the message of the talk before the interaction continues further. It allows monitoring (Krashen 1981) adjusting and subsequent repair (Schegloff et al. 1977) where necessary for effective communication to take place. Faerch and Kasper (1982: 72) summarise this concept thus,

‘In real life communication, there is a constant need for speakers to both self-monitor their own speech production and to monitor the reaction of their interlocutors. There is a need for listeners to ensure that their interpretation of the speaker’s communicative intention in fact matches what he wanted to say. And occasionally, there is a need for both speakers and listeners to solve problems as they crop up...’.

Tottie (1991: 255) includes this function under what she terms the ‘supportive function’ of back channels. It permits the signaling (or not) of comprehension. To demonstrate lack of understanding a listener has three choices: 1. to employ a relevant linguistic device with accompanying intonation, for example, really? or what? with rising intonation or a request for clarification, 2. to move body, face or head in an befitting way, for example, the raising of eyebrows, or 3. to remain silent and not produce feedback where it might normally be expected by the speaker. If one, or a combination, of these is realised then it demonstrates that the listener may not be constructing meaning as intended by the speaker. In an academic environment it is paramount that even if a learner does not attend to pragmatic conventions, s/he must have the necessary resources to operate interactionally and transactionally through the use of response signals.

Cultural Differences

Much research indicates empirically and quite conclusively that differences exist between cultures on how, why and when listenership is demonstrated. Even within cultures that share different varieties of a common language, in this instance English, discrepancies are present. Gardener (1997b) uncovers particular functions and prosodic patterns of the acknowledgment token ‘mm’ in Australian English which do not seem to exist in other varieties. Tottie (1991) in her relative analysis of British and American uses of back channels uncovers formal and gender-based variance. McCarthy (forthcoming) conducts a corpus-based inquiry of what he calls ‘non-minimal’ response tokens (i.e. responses which function with more intensive affective engagement, for example, wonderful) and again finds notable distributional and quantitative differences between American and British usages. From an interethnic perspective, Scollon and Scollon (1981) observed that the Athabaskan native Americans are relatively silent with strangers because they don’t

want to risk imposing different opinions and points of view on them. In such a society speakers and hearers are thought to be highly autonomous and co-constructed meanings are considered a threat. On the other hand, Goodwin (1986: 206) cites an ethnographic study conducted by Haviland (1977) which reports a village chief sending for a 'listener' before making a formal speech because the English speaking observer did not have the linguistic ability to listen with the appropriate responses. Obviously in this cultural context overt listenership is at the opposite end of the cline from that reported by Scollon and Scollon. Furthermore, quite a lot of study has focussed on the comparative use of backchannels in Japanese and English, both inter and intra-culturally (White 1989; Maynard 1990, 1997; Hayashi and Hayashi 1991 (peripherally related to Japanese); White 1997). Findings from most of these investigations indicate that Japanese speakers use more listener response tokens in conversational Japanese and while speaking English in inter-cultural groups and in addition, the native speaker tends to accommodate the non-native speaker (White 1989: 68) by adjusting his/her norms. White (1997) investigated simulated business negotiation meetings and his findings converge for this context. Though interesting we may be tempted to discount the relevance of these findings if we fail to consider the potential outcomes of such diversity. White (1997: 339) implicates that inter-cultural interaction is open to mutual misunderstanding, while White (1989: 72) goes further to suggest that when such misunderstandings occur between proficient users of the language negative feelings and stereotyping may be attributed on a personal level to the guilty participant. Maynard (1997: 37) conforms with this view and expands,

'Conversation between native and non-native speakers of English, even when phonologically and grammatically correct, often evokes a feeling of 'disengagement', 'foreignness', 'estrangement', and moreover a lack of 'respect', which unfortunately sometimes takes the form of 'sympathy' or a disguised sense of superiority over the weaker non-native'.

These assertions are indeed very grave for the EAP student wishing to engage not only with a particular cultural group but also with a specific academic community. In fact the dangers are even more imminent in an academic context as the student is assumed (and usually tested) to have good or excellent linguistic proficiency. This is particularly the case in the language teacher education context under review in the coming sections, where a basic entry requirement for the programme is 'native like proficiency'. Therefore interactional and pragmatic faux-pas (emanating from the incorrect use of listenership devices) may not be

well tolerated. And while I do not wish to suggest conformity to a particular cultural or native speaker determined standard (in fact I have argued elsewhere against this, O’Keeffe and Farr (forthcoming) and for further discussions on linguistic imperialism see also Pennycook 1994; Carter 1997; Cook 1998; Crystal 2000) we must surely encourage an awareness of same and by so doing provide students of EAP with choice on degree of conformity or non-conformity. Relative linguistic analysis of a phenomenon such as listenership will very quickly identify societies where the collaborative construction of text is important and silence is uncomfortable particularly among strangers or non-intimates. At the risk of stereotyping, I think it is fair to say that Irish culture (where the data for the present study is located) not only values, but demands, overt signs (verbal or gesticular) that all parties in an interaction are co-operating in the construction of the talk. We place a very high value on talk, chat, gossip and overt signs of friendliness (often considered to be over imposing by some) and it may be considered a taboo not to actively engage in spoken discourse to which you are a party, whether formal or informal.

Critical Academic Engagement

In a university environment although the setting is institutional, the mission is educational, and the development of higher cognitive and critical skills is paramount. It is now widely recognised that education is achieved through discovery, reflection and insight, therefore the co-construction of discourse is imperative. Honing in very closely on the language teacher education context the focus is strongly in favour of directed self-reflection and analysis for the purposes of teacher development and skills acquisition. Therefore ‘audience’ or ‘auditor’ participation in any discourse is not only important but primary. To be accepted EAP students will be expected, rightly or wrongly, to act in accordance with such principles and priorities.

The Data and Analytical Framework

For the present analysis I have used a mini-corpus of spoken language recorded at the University of Limerick, Ireland. The interactions scrutinised are dyadic meetings between tutors (two female) and students (three males and six females) involved in an MA in English Language Teaching programme. They

take place in the tutor's office and have the clearly identifiable pedagogic objective of reviewing and critiquing a teaching practice lesson the student has taught. This corpus consists of ten dialogues, each containing between thirty and forty minutes of data. The transcriptions have a total word count of just under seventy thousand words. The data will hereafter be referred to as POTTI (post observation trainer-trainee interactions). Due to the practical difficulties and obtrusiveness of video recording in a small office setting only audio recordings were obtained and therefore no non-verbal signals of listenership are included in the following analysis. This does not challenge in any way either that a relationship exists between listenership and gesticulation or between verbal and non-verbal signals (for further discussion see Dittmann and Llewellyn 1968; Duncan 1974; Duncan and Niederehe 1974; Maynard 1990, 1997).

Through a preliminary qualitative analysis the notion of listenership was deemed to be realised in three ways in POTTI, which form the bases for the following analytical categories. Bear in mind that this exploration has formal and pragmatic considerations at its centre as it is part of a larger research project conducting a corpus-based investigation of effective and affective communication strategies in the language teacher education context. The intention here is not to belittle issues of location, sequence or position (as often examined by those working in the conversation analysis tradition), it simply indicates alternative delimitations and aims. The three categories formulated were minimal response tokens, non-minimal response tokens and overlaps/interruptions. Goodwin (1986) identifies two main functions performed by response tokens. One he calls 'continuers' (after Schegloff 1982) for items which simply acknowledge and convey a message of satisfaction for the current speaker to continue. Assessments, on the other hand, comment on the content of the talk and show some sort of higher level emotional reaction, the utterance of which may be more consequential for the ensuing talk. These two formal and functional classes I have named minimal response tokens (after Fellegly 1995; Gardener 1997a; McCarthy forthcoming) and non-minimal response tokens (McCarthy forthcoming) to highlight the interpersonal, affective and pragmatic concerns of my exploration. Furthermore, I have added a third category particularly applicable to an academic and teacher education context because it indicates engagement on a critical and semantic (and probably also emotional) level with the propositional content of the utterance. This class includes overlaps and interruptions and will be differentiated on the basis of speaker role.

Minimal Response Tokens

This category includes items examined or discussed previously by Fries (1952), Yngve (1970), Duncan (1974), Duncan and Fiske (1977), Schegloff (1982), Jefferson (1984), Tottie (1991), Zimmerman (1993), Beach (1993), Drummond and Hopper (1993a, 1993b), Gardener (1997a, 1997b) O’Keeffe and Adolphs (forthcoming), amongst others. I have included here the tokens yeah, mm hm, mm, yes, okay and no. These were counted only when in utterance initial position and not extending into a fuller turn. I have also included occurrences where they are followed by other single word response tokens, for example, yeah okay (what Tottie 1991 calls a ‘complex’ back channel). Repetitions (or ‘double’ back channels after Tottie 1991), for example, yeah yeah, were counted once as they function as a single response.

(INSERT TABLE 1 HERE)

Table 1 illustrates the frequency and order of frequency of the minimal responses under scrutiny. It is important to remember that these findings may diverge from previous results due to genre and language variety. Most of the research in this field to date has investigated casual conversation, whereas the present data can be considered to be much higher on the ladder of formality. It is what I call ‘semi-formal instructional interaction’. Discounting genre, and in general terms, it can be said that this data seems to be more similar to American English than British English. Both White (1989) and Tottie (1991) report yeah and mm hm in first and second order of frequency in their American data with yes featuring highest in British English. Furthermore the POTTI data contains a relatively high number of mm occurrences, suggested by Gardener (1997b) to be typical of Australian English usage. Although these are certainly interesting hypotheses they are by no means empirically conclusive due the disparity between data sets and procedures. I will now continue to discuss each of the items individually in relation to their functions and clustering.

Yeah

Yeah occurs a total of 1383 times in POTTI and almost exactly half (688) of these function as minimal response tokens. This suggests that it probably performs a wider range of functions, occupies other utterance positions and indicates speaker incipency more than some of the tokens to be discussed later. Previous studies of *yeah* as a response token conclude that its functions range from agreeing

acknowledgement tokens or continuer (Drummond and Hopper 1993b; Gardener 1997: 23, O’Keeffe and Adolphs forthcoming), to speaker incipency tokens (Jefferson 1984; Drummond and Hopper 1993a, 1993b), to simple back channels (Yngve 1970). In POTTI it seems to perform three, not entirely discrete, functions. Firstly it acts as a marker of convergence, agreement or confirmation, for example,

Tutor: Otherwise it’ll be Monday and that’s just too far away you know it really is in terms of the amount of things that are happening in between for you and me both I’m sure.

Student: Yeah.

In this function it is preferred to the more formal yes, perhaps to reduce formality and create the semblance of more symmetrical dyadic relations. The second and third functions seem to merge and were next to impossible to isolate with any degree of confidence. Here yeah acknowledges the information that has been received and also encourages the speaker to continue speaking. This is apparent in the following extract.

Student: And I actually got covered what I’d planned to get covered and I stuck to the times I’d allocated as well so+

Tutor: Yeah.

Student: +and I was aware of that.

It is worthy of note that in this second function, when employed by the tutor it doesn’t signal any sort of agreement or convergence. In fact, many times, she goes on to offer a counter opinion. When yeah collocates with another response token its function is usually determined by the meaning of that token. The following examples were found in the data, yeah yeah (38), yeah okay (5), yeah mm hm (3), yeah mm (3), yeah exactly (3), yeah right (2), yeah absolutely (1), yeah definitely (1), yeah good (1), yeah possibly (1), yeah so (1), yeah sure (1).

Mm hm

The 286 uses of mm hm are predominately in the role of what Schegloff (1982) calls ‘continuers’. What separates it from yeah however is that it is rarely used to mark absolute convergence or agreement (unless it extends to a fuller turn). In fact, it is sometimes uttered as a kind of holding device before a difference of

opinion is ultimately voiced by its user. This is typical of tutor use and is illustrated by the turn-initial ‘but’ in the following example,

- Student: I’m trying to get the whole section into a few minutes and you know that was going to be very quick and+
- Tutor: Mm hm.
- Student: +yeah and it did.
- Tutor: But I mean you know you dealt with that reasonably well.

Clusters are infrequent with this token apart from the following insignificant cases: mm hm mm hm (2), mm hm mm (1), mm hm okay (1).

Mm

The 178 examples of mm in the POTTI data fall within the realm of the ‘weak acknowledging’ token function examined in detail by Gardener (1997b). The fact that it is preferred by students in the data is possibly indicative of its neutral and unimposing status. It may be used in a bid to show deference and respect and to avoid sounding over confident or patronising. When used by the tutor it often suggests acknowledgement without or with limited agreement and like mm hm, in these cases it holds a pending divergence of opinion or criticism. From this perspective it displays a degree of speaker incipency. For example,

- Student: Maybe it was my lack of enthusiasm but+
- Tutor: Mm.
- Student: +... I just got the feeling that it ended badly.
- Tutor: It did the in the sense

Only two instances of repetitions and no other clusters were found for this token. Perhaps this is further symbolic of limited or weak engagement to indicate that while an opportunity to continue is on offer the outcome is unsure.

Yes

Agreement and confirmation are the most common functions of yes in the tutor-student interactions. It leaves little room for interpretation or ambiguity by the speaker in most instances. It often conveys the encouraging message ‘You’ve got it, I agree and/or understand completely’ and therefore typifies the instructional genre in which it is found. In fact only one repeated occurrence was found. Perhaps its strength as a single token suffices. A typical example is,

Student: ...we got the rules together+

Tutor: Yes.

Student: +so hopefully+

Tutor: Yes so you elicited the rule correctly.

Okay

Beach (1993) provides a detailed account of this particular token, its functions and locations. He suggests that when it is found as a free-standing receipt token it can have dual functions (Beach 1993: 329). Firstly it can acknowledge talk and secondly it can signal affiliation. In the present data the first function is predominant. In fact, it rarely signals agreement. It effectively camouflages affiliation or otherwise. Only in the two cases of clustering, okay right (2) and okay yeah (2), can it be considered a convergence token.

No

There are only 8 instances of no as a receipt token outside of its use to answer a polar question. All of these examples function as convergence indicators, for example,

Student: ...I didn’t want to take the dictionary off them+

Tutor: No.

Student: +and I didn’t want to impose on them either...

The analysis of minimal response tokens in this context leads me to two broad conclusions. Firstly, a range of functions may be performed discretely or concurrently by these tokens and often without hope for the

researcher to disambiguate. Secondly, familiarity with the data leads me to believe that pragmatic matters hold high priority. It is important for both parties to show interest and constant engagement. Because the genre is professional and instructional co-operation is paramount and the stakes are high. There is something to be taught and something to be learned and therefore success must reign. What is offered as a minimal acknowledgement often matters less than the fact that something is offered. A basic visual examination of the transcriptions highlights very frequent speaker switching. There are very few uninterrupted or prolonged discourse chunks. I am inclined in the direction of Schegloff's (1982: 85) observations that

‘...the availability of a range of tokens may matter less for the difference of meaning or usage between them (if any) than for the possibility thereby allowed of varying the composition of a series of them. Use in four or five consecutive slots of the same token may then be used to hint incipient disinterest while varying the tokens across the series, whatever tokens are employed, may mark a baseline of interest’.

Non-minimal Responses Tokens

Another option available to the listener during the speaker's extended turn is to respond in a more affective way to the talk by commenting or offering a brief opinion on it. Goodwin (1986) classifies such talk as assessment-oriented. McCarthy (forthcoming) uses the term ‘non-minimal response tokens’ which indicates both an interpersonal and pragmatic focus. I have chosen to adopt the latter. The functional operation of these tokens is apparent, therefore a comparative quantitative analysis will be provided. Based on previous studies and preliminary observation of the data, the items on Table 2 were selected and their response token function was isolated. We can see that there is a moderate range of tokens but the total frequency still reaches only 11.59% of the total number of minimal response tokens (148 versus 1276 occurrences). In order to appreciate the significance of these findings for the situation under inquiry a comparative analysis is presented (casual conversation results are compiled from McCarthy forthcoming based on British and American spoken corpora).

(INSERT TABLE 2 HERE)

Some of the differences found between data sets can be attributed to language variety, for example, gosh, certainly and quite are stereotypically not used in Irish English. Similarly, wow, might be more often

associated with American English, while religious swear words like God and Jesus, are quite common and acceptable in Irish English, even in semi-formal academic contexts. On the other hand, there are disparities which must surely be genre resultant. It is not surprising to find that the more emotive and dramatic tokens used in casual conversation such as, excellent, wonderful, and perfect, are not found in POTTI. After all, if student performances were as superlative as these tokens suggest there would be no need for review sessions. In this context, were such tokens uttered they may be considered ironic or patronising. Furthermore, as a culture, Irish people are not disposed to be overly expressive or forthright but more hedgy and tentative and their language use reflects this (for further discussion see Farr and O'Keeffe forthcoming). Instead we can find confirmatory tokens such as *right*, *exactly*, and *absolutely* being quite high in frequency in the language teacher education context as these exhibit a more pedagogic and instructional orientation. They often occur in the *F* (feedback) turn in Sinclair and Coulthard's (1975) IRF pedagogic interactional pattern model. Clearly then, culture, context and goal direction determine very strongly which tokens are most appropriately used. For the uninitiated EAP student, for whom culture and context may be unfamiliar, some directed awareness is surely pivotal.

Overlaps and Interruptions

The organisational accomplishment of spoken interaction, in general, results from the on-line allocation of speaking turns at 'possible completion points' (Lerner 1989: 167). Conversely, simultaneous speech results, according to Duncan (1974: 165), when the listener claims the turn at times where the relevant turn switching signal has not been displayed. Therefore the system may be over-ridden or violated by a speaker initiating talk in the course of another speaker's turn. Two resolutions may ensue. Firstly, the current speaker may delay completion (Lerner 1989) until the interruption is complete or secondly, both speakers may continue to talk (Jefferson 1983). Both are discrete phenomena, although frequently in the past they have been subsumed under the umbrella term 'interruption'. In this study I differentiate and define an interruption as a situation where a speaker loses the floor before he had intended to relinquish it (Beattie 1981: 16) but no simultaneous speech results. An overlap however does involve some simultaneous speech during such an event.

A chronology of empirical studies to date highlights three distinct trends. Gender and personality based investigations gained favour with Zimmerman and West's (1975) publication where they conclude that men interrupt more than women in mixed dyads and attribute this to male dominance and power. Contrary results were presented by Ferguson (1977) who failed to find substantial relationships between interruptions and dominance. Beattie (1981), examining university tutorial talk found no gender-based differences on frequency of production but found that status had a significant effect, with students producing more interruptions than tutors. However, tutors preferred the overlapping type of interruption traditionally correlated with notions of dominance. Similarly, Tannen (1985) illustrates that regional differences in speech norms were a more determinate factor than sex. Murray (1987) finds that women are capable of more interruption and this is corroborated by Bilous and Krauss (1988) for single but not mixed gender dyads. The second vein of study examines issues of culture (see White 1997 citing Halmari 1993 and Graham 1985), intelligence (Rim 1977), confidence and anxiety Natale et al. (1979) correlates of interruption. And finally, the third perspective views interruption as a positive device as it has the potential to indicate 'heightened involvement' in medial positions within talk (Gallois and Marke 1975). Meltzer (1971), observes that interruptions are not necessarily 'battles for ascendancy' and Natale et al. (1979) talk of 'joint enthusiasm'. Based on my present results I tend to agree with this opinion that interruption and overlap are strong tokens of engaged listenership and contribute in a positive way to the dyadic conversations under review.

However, I also agree with Murray's (1988: 115) observations that 'interruption is always an interpretation – by interactants as well as by analysts – of the intent of a second speaker'. Unfortunately research in this area focussing on dominance or gender has often led to sensationalist claims. Furthermore the conversation analysis tradition tends to prompt overgeneralisations based on significantly few instances. For these reasons I have taken a combined quantitative and qualitative approach to my data in an attempt to redress these imbalances. I hasten to add that due to present limitations the following analysis is preliminary in nature and raises as many research questions as it may answer. However it provides a useful starting point to consider the implications for an EAP context. Due to the manual intensity of quantification for this section the analysis is based on a 15,382 word sample of all female dyadic encounters.

(INSERT TABLE 3 HERE)

We can see from Table 3 that quantifiably there is an almost perfectly equal distribution with tutors initiating 48 times and students 49. Although contrary to Beattie's (1981) findings it makes sense if we consider the instructional nature of the interaction and the fact that it is dyadic. Even though the tutor has status and is the dominant figure in terms of knowledge, control and professional position she does not overtly demonstrate this power through manipulation of the dialogue using the above mentioned strategies. Instead she plays her pedagogic role by eliciting self-reflection and allowing uninterrupted student talk (supported by response tokens as seen earlier). Rather it is the students who employ two of the three strategies more regularly. Again this makes sense in the context of the performance and assessment based system under discussion. Students are under a certain amount of stress to 'get it right' in terms of intonation and also future performances. They will want to make an equal contribution to the talk and also extract appropriate direction from tutors at relevant junctures. This is further highlighted through the functional analysis of overlaps and interruptions to follow. On a less egalitarian note we can observe that in all cases an overlap initiated by the tutor results in taking control of the floor. This is perhaps a pragmatic sign of student deference to her status. More optimistically, overlapping is much less common than interruption. This may show less competition for control and a high degree of politeness, concession and a willingness to allow the other speaker co-construct the text. To substantiate some of these claims, the following table provides a rudimentary functional analysis of overlaps and interruptions.

(INSERT TABLE 4 HERE)

Based on these findings it is my contention that such non-fluent speaker switches (Ferguson 1977) are not simply signs of dominance or control. In fact they are often not employed by the higher status individual possibly in order to create an atmosphere of solidarity versus power and domination. Because the vast majority of the examples reviewed did not initiate a topic change they can be considered positive markers of listenership, facilitation and interest as evidenced by their functions outlined in Table 4. After all, effective interruption doesn't normally take place if the interrupting speaker has been a passive, uninterested recipient. Most often overlaps and interruptions show affective engagement as the speakers are engaged emotionally with both the talk content and the face needs of the other speaker. Where these

strategies are used to curtail another's utterance it is usually because the utterance is going to be overly critical or because it is an incorrect conclusion or summation of events and may lead to a false diagnosis of the problem under review. Again the intention is positive.

Conclusion

I hope that I have clearly shown the importance and realisation of engaged listenership in the academic context under analysis. Throughout this paper I have hinted at pedagogic significance and would now like to conclude by briefly discussing four implications for the teaching of skills in EAP programmes, particularly in relation to applied arts and humanities students.

Speaking while listening skills

Traditionally the items considered in this paper have failed to find a comfortable pedagogic home as they fall somewhere between the teaching of speaking and the teaching of listening skills in EAP. Speaking skills have tended to focus on more extensive production, for example, formal academic presentation, and listening skills have either taken a top-down or bottom up approach (see Celce-Murcia 1995 for further discussion), for example, taking lecture notes. Given the multi-functional nature of listenership devices, students can benefit greatly from understanding and using them for interactive, pragmatic, argumentative and trouble shooting purposes as part of a productive listening skills unit.

Variety of experience

Johns and Swales (2002: 26) call for the need to expose EAP students to a variety of experiences and contexts, not only for cultural reasons but also to ensure a broader understanding of the academic community to which they are affiliated. I, and others, have established the importance of spoken as well as written language instruction but in addition we must familiarise students with many spoken academic genres as each has its own characteristics and demands. This should include formal and less formal contexts as well as dyadic and non-dyadic situations involving speakers of diverse ages, sex, status, dominance, background, culture.

Monitoring the discipline

Disciplines tend to foster established internal norms in relation to accepted practice and procedure. In the case of language teacher education students are initiated through such customs as peer observation of classroom encounters, tutor assisted lesson preparation etc. Canagarajah (2002: 30) advocates 'peripheral participation in communities of practice' as being ideal until a time comes when the student has the knowledge and confidence to become a full member. My experience in teaching EAP has shown that the use of data taken from the locally relevant context has aided students in this 'apprenticeship' process and provide a very welcome stepping stone. This applies to any situation unsuitable or unavailable for genuine observation.

Corpus-based instruction

Technology has become a prerequisite in most walks of life, not least in academic and pedagogic circles (Hyland and Hamp-Lyons 2002: 8). The development of computer-related skills can be implemented effectively in EAP programmes by providing corpus-based instruction. Corpora are now commercially available or easily constructed from local sources and come with a range of software. The real advantage of instructing corpus-analytical skills on EAP programmes is their potential application for the critical investigation of almost any aspect of language related issues. Anything from syntactic structure, to collocation, to gender, to communication strategies, to conditions of use, can be inspected. Therefore, the use of corpora have the potential to improve not only technological skills but the many aspects of language awareness and use discussed in this paper and more.

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Table 1 Minimal Response Tokens in POTTI

Minimal Response Token	Occurrences in POTTI (70,000 words)
Yeah	688
Mm hm	286
Mm	178
Yes	65
Okay	51
No	8
Total	1276

Table 2 Non-minimal Response Tokens in POTTI and Casual Conversations

POTTI	Casual Conversation (British and American)
Right (80)	Right
Exactly (27)	Wow
Sure (20)	Exactly
Really (6)	Gosh
Absolutely (3)	Absolutely
Fine (3)	Sure
True (3)	Definitely
God (2)	Lovely
Definitely (2)	Great
Good (1)	Fine
Jesus (1)	Really
	Good
	Excellent
	Wonderful
	True
	Certainly
	Perfect
	Quite

Table 3 Frequencies of Overlaps and Interruptions (sample of 15,382 words from the POTTI corpus)

	Tutor Initiated	Student Initiated	Total
Overlap with no speaker switch	0	5	5
Overlap with speaker switch	12	15	27
Interruption	36	29	65
Total	48	49	97

Table 4 Functions of Overlaps and Interruptions (sample of 15,382 words from the POTTI corpus)

	Tutor Initiated	Student Initiated
Overlap with no speaker switch	No occurrences	To confirm, agree, concede
Overlap with speaker switch	To curtail student self criticism, to direct and elicit student reflection	To justify/rationalise performance, to answer an unfinished tutor question, to seek clarification/advice
Interruption	To curtail student self criticism, to direct and elicit student reflection, to provide relevant facts/information, to justify student performance, to acknowledge and feedback on student talk in a positive or negative way, to empathise, to close a topic	To confirm, agree, concede, to justify/rationalise performance, to answer an unfinished tutor question, to seek clarification/advice, to provide humour